In Quaint Old Saboba—Where Life Flows on Calmly

This is the story of a village made famous in Helen Hunt Jackson's romance, "Ramona." It is situated in a valley just under the western slope of the San Jacinto spur of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Typical of the houses of Saboba.

THE very quaintest of all the quaint spots of semi-tropical Southern California is the Indian village of Saboba, nestling in a valley just under the western slope of the San Jacinto spur of the San Bernardino range of mountains. Nowhere else in California may calm, easy Indian life be better observed. In no other locality, probably, can the student of anthropology find more accurate subjects for study of primitive Mexican Indian characteristics, outside of warlike pursuits and sins learned from the palefaces, than here in queer old Saboba. By the grace of the contrast with the busy, progressive civilization of the New Englanders all about, there is not another spot in all California so interesting to every one as this typical Indian village. So eminent an authority as former President Eliot of Harvard University is quoted as having said, during his visit in Southern California, that the most profitable day he had spent in months was that on which he visited the Indian village of Saboba.

The name of the village, which in the mouths of the Indians who are its sole inhabitants takes on a far more musical sound than its appearance in cold type would appear to make possible, is familiar enough to all readers of Helen Hunt Jackson's romance, "Ramona," some of whose most thrilling though apocryphal scenes are located there. The greater number of those readers doubtless have set down the village of Saboba as being as much the fiction of the imagination as the remainder of the tale which gave it fame, and they may be surprised to learn that such a place actually exists. Exist it does, nevertheless, and in one of the loveliest valleys in the Golden State.

Thousands of persons come and go at San Jacinto, the thriving town of modern build, four miles or so distant, without knowing that close at hand is this ancient Indian rancheria, and the "oldest inhabitant" receives with an expression of surprise any inquiry concerning the place. He cannot for the life of him see why anybody should care to concern himself with the abiding place of a number of Indians. Some there are, however, in the town who take the liveliest and friendliest interest in the remnant of the tribe of Mission Indians who cling so tenaciously to the spot where their forefathers dwelt from time immemorial. A gentleman chanced to have a few spare hours at his disposal on the occasion of a visit to this locality and the subject of "Ramona" having been broached, it was suggested that a visit to Saboba and a possible call on Señora Ramona herself, who is a resident of that neighborhood, might afford an agreeable experience.

It was a lovely morning in the semi-tropics. The hills that surround the valley like an amphitheatre were green with their growth of wild grasses, the plain was carpeted with flowers of varied hue which filled the air with their fragrance. The atmosphere was fresh with the breeze from the pine-clad mountains, whose summits towered 7,000 and 8,000 feet high in the near distance. Orange groves, olive orchards and fields of alfalfa stretched across the valley from mountain base to the foothills. From San Jacinto the road runs up the valley for a short distance, and soon enters the thickets of *guatemote* that line the bed of the San Jacinto River. With a watchful eye for quicksands, the stream is crossed, then a belt of willow jungle is traversed, the road being only a single track, almost overgrown with brush, and when this is passed a belt of cleared land is reached, and we are on the outskirts of Saboba.

There are some little vineyards and orchards; the vines and trees appear to have been planted in haphazard fashion without regard to straight lines, or, mayhap, it is because the bulk of them have died that the survivors look as if they had been struck into the ground in the footsteps of some one who had been dodging a jack rabbit across the field. There are a couple Indians plowing in their fields; that is to say, they are supposed to be doing so. But the horses stand with heads down, apparently asleep, while in the shade of the peach trees sit the two toilers, lazily rolling and smoking cigarettes. They have done perhaps a dozen furrows this afternoon, and this is doubtless the fourth or fifth time they have halted to have a neighborly smoke and a monosyllabic chat.

The scene is thoroughly typical of the Indian character. It is difficult enough to keep one of the tribe at work under the watchful eye of a white observer, but when he is his own master and servant at the same time he becomes most gloriously careless of the passage of time and heedless of the condition of the work to be performed. If he accomplishes in a week what a white man does in a day, what odds! As long as he has a pouch of tobacco in his pocket; a shelter, no matter how rude, for his head; a blanket; a pair of overalls, and a shirt for his body, with the wherewithal for filling his stomach at more or less regular intervals, he is *muy contento*.

Why should he worry? The year is long, and after that another will come, and then another, and so on to the end. Why work one's self to death, like the foolish *Americano?* There is plenty of time to prepare the land for maize, frijol, and *sandia* patches, not forgetting the rows of chilies. Where is the harm, then, if Pedro and Ramona sit down in the shade for a quiet smoke, or even a comfortable little snooze, with the meadow larks over yonder in the willows singing sweetest melodies? *Mañana—Mañana*—never do today what you can just as well put off till tomorrow. That is the Indian's philosophy, and as he appears to thrive and be happy upon it, who shall say his is not the most sensible way of getting through life! Go over into the American settlement yonder and see the white man rushing to and fro from early morning until late at night, driving, hurrying as only an American does. Yet what does he get out of life more than an Indian? Why not go over into Saboba, consider the Indian, study his ways, and be wise?

Now the roads climb up on the *mesa* above the bottom lands, which have been tilled by the Indians these many years. The strip of arable land is small, hence none may be wasted in roads, which are relegated to the barren *mesa*, where no water is. Down below, a row of cottonwood trees, their soft, downy blossoms floating away on the breeze and making little drifts in the road, marks the line of the *zenja* which carries the water from the river to the little fields of the Indians. And, by the way, these poor, ignorant, untutored savages have hit upon a solution of the land question which is the acme of fairness, and which all the combined wisdom of ages cannot well surpass. It is nothing more nor less than a practical and successful exemplification of the theories of those who do not believe in individual ownership of land. To begin with, none of the villagers are speculative farmers. That is to say, none of them care to raise large crops or cultivate more land than will provide for the simple wants of their family. None desire to accumulate beyond that point. So each year the village chief allots to those who apply such tracts of land as they desire to cultivate. No man is given control of a larger area than he actually cultivates, and there is enough for all. As long as a man desires a piece of land and will care for it he retains it, but the moment he refrains from cultivating the whole or any portion of it, then it is taken away provided any one wants it. But no one owns an acre of land; it all belongs to the tribe as a whole and is subject to the control of the captain in whose decisions all acquiesce.

Scattered along the banks of the little *aqua* in the shade of the cottonwoods are the houses of the villagers, their walls being gray adobe, scarcely distinguishable from the soil itself. Here and there a woman or a girl is hard at work washing clothes in the stream and on the limbs of the willows and *guatemotes* are spread snowy garments, mingled with those of brighter hue, showing that a regard for cleanliness is not at all incompatible with Indian nature, and is equally strong with the love of bright colors. Paddling in the water, rolling about in the sun, sometimes with a single garment, sometimes as naked as the day they were born, are plump, brown-skinned babies, their black eyes snapping with curiosity as the visitors halt a moment, while anon a band of a dozen of the little rascals go scurrying away into the bush like a flock of startled quail. Evidently the bogie man is as much a reality with these youngsters as with others of lighter hue.

The schoolhouse is, of course, visited. It is a low brown-walled adobe structure, almost hidden beneath the branches and foliage of great cottonwood trees near the road. Doors and windows stand wide open to admit the balmy air, and through them glimpses are caught of a number of jet-black heads, dark faces and flashing eyes. There are a score and more of pupils, both boys and girls, and well-behaved pupils they are, too. The visitors are welcomed at the door by the teacher, who has devoted years to her chosen task of educating the youthful Indians. Brought up in the valley only a few miles away, knowing the Indian dialect and the Indian character as well, she has the complete confidence of her pupils and their parents, too, and so is able to accomplish vastly more than a stranger or one whose entire sympathy is not enlisted in the work.

The youngsters bend over their books and slates, and save for a quick, sly glance now and then shot at the strangers take no notice of their presence. The exercises of the school proceed as usual. The children sing, read and answer questions, in arithmetic, geography and spelling readily and without embarrassment. A small number of white children, with ages of cultivation behind them and the best blood in their veins, could have done no better than these youths who were the first in their tribe to imbibe the simplest rudiments of education after thousands of years of savagery. Away in a back seat was a little chap of perhaps twelve who had been busy with his slate for some time, occasionally darting a quick glance at the visitor who was seated with his face to the school. Being asked in what lines her pupils showed the most proficiency, the teacher answered that one was in drawing, and they evinced great aptitude in imitating people, animals and other objects. "I think I can show you a sample," she said, her quick eye having been cast upon the youth in the back seat. As she walked in that direction, the youngster quickly turned his slate, face to his desk, but it was captured, nevertheless, and found to contain a very good likeness indeed of the visitor, even to the details of a corner of a handkerchief peeping from a pocket, the watch chain and locket, and so on; in fact, nothing had been omitted in facial feature or dress. The drawing was clever indeed and no more than five minutes had been consumed in making it.

"Ramona."

Noticing a couple American flags adorning the wall, a question was asked concerning them, which elicted the reply that one of the strongest sentiments, and one entertained with the greatest unanimity by these decendents of those who once owned the entire continent, was patriotism. Their affection for the flag is sincere, and they delight in being known first as Americans and then as Indians.

The pupils are of all ages, from the little tot just lisping her letters to the stalwart six-footer who is still wrestling with the primer, his desire for an education not having been stimulated until he was long past the age when the white youth has usually been graduated. Nevertheless he is not discouraged, but pores over the wonderful tales about Mrs. Cat and Mme. Rat with an earnestness that augurs well for the future. Several hours were spent in wandering about the settlement. There was apparently a friendly feeling for the visitors on the part of the natives, but not one of the men or women here and there so much as uttered a word except among themselves. Life is too short to spend moments in idle conversation with strangers who will probably never come again. There were fully a dozen men who, the school teacher said, were without a shadow of a doubt over 100 years old and had never been fifty miles away from Saboba. Three were pointed out who were young men when the San Fernando Mission was built, near Los Angeles, by the Franciscan Fathers, in 1806. They possess as sacred talismen the parchment scrips that were given them by the holy teachers those many decades ago. They are very proud fellows and usually of serene and contented dispositions, but on the day of the visit here told of, a young lady tourist had without warning snapped a camera at several of the patriarchs of the tribe, and they spent hours after mumbling over to themselves words of wrath at such intrusion by the whites. Primitive and simple as the Indians of Saboba are, they know that the pictures mean that their lineaments are to be paraded before palefaces everywhere.